

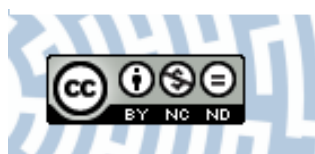


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**Title:** Luck, Ignorance, and Moral Attitude

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**Citation style:** Machura Piotr. (2015). Luck, Ignorance, and Moral Attitude. "Folia Philosophica" (T. 34 (2015), s. 231-250).



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## Luck, Ignorance, and Moral Attitude

**Abstract:** Public opinion has it that ethics should be concerned with studying and providing precise and reliable rules of conduct. This view is based in a long philosophical tradition which begins with the Stoics and continues at least to Kant; it is, however, a false view. There are good reasons to turn our attention to these aspects of moral thinking which refer to and emphasize the element of risk and uncertainty. In the article I briefly discuss two of such reasons: the problem of moral luck and the problem of action based on ignorance. Consideration of these two problems leads to the conclusion that the most tricky element in moral thinking is the firm belief of the subject in the truth of the premises on which they base their actions and in the irrelevance of external factors to the assessment of their deeds. In this light I argue that the basic requirement for a moral justification of a particular action is not its conformity to a certain set of rules but the subject's critical reflection on their course of action. Indeed, what turns an attitude into a moral attitude is an amoral, epistemological factor: criticism and openness to uncertainty.

**Keywords:** ethics, critical thought, philosophical criticism, moral luck, ignorance, moral attitude

It would seem that ethics is that field of knowledge which should support man in offering indications as to the proper way to act (along with their justification). In the basic formula of moral reasoning, i.e. the practical syllogism going back to Aristotle, in which the major premise is constituted by the description of a certain good or a moral principle, while the minor premise is constituted by the description of the situation in which the subject finds himself, and the conclusion is action (or, in accordance with the correction introduced by St. Thomas Aquinas, a decision), all the elements of the reasoning seem to head in the direction of achieving a justified conviction about the rightfulness of the action undertaken on its basis. In consequence, the moral attitude

that Aristotle posits is based on the weighing of rightful evaluations and habits on the basis of those rightful convictions, which—strengthened by the effect of intellectual virtues—are to lead to the achievement of an objectively-correct vision of human good.

This absolutizing concept of ethics that accents the rightfulness and certainty of the normative basis of action was strengthened by Kant, especially in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*.<sup>1</sup> In his understanding, what determines a decision's rightfulness is good will, the criterion of which is agreement with the formal principle of the categorical imperative. Thus, when I ask myself what I should do in a given situation, how I should behave towards a given event or given person, what determines the rightfulness of my decision is an affirmative answer to the question of whether I could want the rule lying at the basis of the chosen solution to be universally-binding.

We must note, however, that both Aristotle's and—especially—Kant's conceptions seem to possess several essential limitations. First of all, they are based on the premise that the knowledge on the basis of which the subject acts is at the very least justified, i.e. that the subject is aware of all the essential facts providing for the axiological character of the object of the decision and the action. In Kant's conception in particular the subject's conviction as the rightfulness and exhaustive character of his moral reasoning seems to be an irrefutable element. Second, within the bounds of such an understanding, little significance is given to the external conditions affecting the evaluation of the decision and the action.

All of these elements raise certain doubts, which are tied above all with the availability of sufficient information that would allow for a fully justified decision about a given action to be made. In practice, it is rare to find a situation where the subject has certain knowledge regarding both premises of the reasoning at his disposition. On the one hand, profound reservations concerning the legitimacy of norms of traditional

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<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. M. Gregor (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1998).

morality appear (regarding the treatment of animals, for example), on the other hand—full knowledge concerning the situation in which a subject must act is rare. And this concerns both a full, exhaustive description of the unintended consequences of the action being undertaken, and those elements and aspects that cannot be taken into consideration by the subject due to his limitations.

Thus, we should ask the question of what the relationship is between these aspects of action, which elude classically-understood forms of moral reasoning—a lack of knowledge and luck—and the proper form of moral attitude. The main thesis of the following reflections is that what makes our decisions and acts *moral* is precisely the fact that we take these elements into account and that, simultaneously, we submit our normative premises and available knowledge to a critical analysis. In the last part of the article, I indicate that the virtue which in a fundamental way characterizes a certain *hexis* as moral is a type of open-mindedness, directed at the possibility of taking into account new facts and alternative standpoints, and—above all—a critical attitude towards its own normative premises and decisions. In other words, what determines a morally-positive evaluation of decision and action is a type of constitutive uncertainty and an analysis of one's own way of forming judgments and decisions.

### **Moral Luck and Moral Evaluation**

The main limitation of the absolutizing conception of ethics is the limited character of human agency. These limitations may derive from either the subject himself/herself, or be the result of external factors.

Let us first take a look at the second case. The basic problem in the Kantian conception of morality is the heteronomy of moral evaluation. Its essence is the incompatibility of the internal criterion of legitimacy proposed by Kant and the rightfulness of a given action, and the external evaluation of the moral act as imposed by others in connection with the public character of action. In essence, the subject's inter-

nal convictions about the rightfulness of his action can not only be questioned by undermining the legitimacy of the principle on which it rests, which Bernard Williams calls<sup>2</sup> intrinsic luck, but also even the subject's deepest conviction, manifest in action, becomes the object of public evaluation (extrinsic luck). As Williams notes, a positive evaluation of such action—and, consequently, of the subject himself/herself—will depend on what the conditions of the evaluation are. Such conditions remain beyond the subject's control.

This is not only because these conditions are determined by the distance in time between four elements: the decision, the execution of the action, the appearance of its consequences, and its evaluation, but also by the actions of others. Thus, this is not only the question of information dispersal, but also of the possibility of an essential change appearing that would repeal the legitimacy of the decision upon which the action was undertaken. To show how external circumstances condition moral evaluation, in *Moral Luck* Williams uses the example of Gauguin as the figure of an artist who commits an immoral action in order to open the door to achieving his artistic potential. What is especially interesting in this example is the asymmetry between the number of conditions that lead to the positive or negative evaluation of Gauguin's action. On the one hand, its positive evaluation—which is *not* a moral evaluation<sup>3</sup>—is based solely on his artistic success,<sup>4</sup> while a negative

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Williams, "Moral Luck," in: *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1981), p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> One of the effects of Williams' analysis is that it drew attention to the necessity of limiting the applicability of moral principles. It seems that this conclusion can be generalized—one of the tasks of ethics is to delimit the boundaries of its indications' applicability and its relation to other systems of norms. However, on the descriptive level, the fact remains that the evaluations of accomplishments often take precedence over moral evaluations, which become only (at most) components of a certain practical evaluation. This evaluation is of a social character—it is the reaction of a group that feels the effects of a given subject's action—and as such seems to hierarchize individual systems of norms in a manner dependent on the significance of a specific aspect of the subject's action for society. That is why the relationships between individual components are mutable and depend—among other things—on the social role, or rather—on which aspect of the subject's action is most important from the group's point of view. In this sense, insofar as for the majority of people a moral evaluation may be the most important in their overall evaluation, for a renowned artist it may be of secondary importance.

<sup>4</sup> A separate question is the extent to which this success must be achieved in a relatively short time. From a philosophical point of view, it would be interesting to trace the way in which moral evaluations vary in time. The question of these evaluations' mutability in time also remains open.

evaluation can be upheld (*sic!*) by the appearance of a range of factors that are only partially dependent of on the action of Gauguin himself: from the wreck of the ship taking him to Tahiti, through the problems connected with becoming accustomed to a new environment, to the changing market conditions, which, in a way, constitute the material basis of artistic success.

What makes a given action moral<sup>5</sup> is its social character, i.e. its significance for other people. In the example cited by Williams, what makes it impossible to pass by Gauguin's actions indifferently and what makes it the object of moral evaluation is that immoral fact (the abandonment of his family) which constitutes the source of all his later success. The ambiguity that appears here is complex—not only the comprehensive evaluation of Gauguin's action is based on the element of luck, trust in the benevolence of external factors, but above all the lack of a solution to the question of whether non-moral success (the achievement of an essential non-moral value) can outweigh a negative moral evaluation. On the one hand, conscientiousness, if not moral rigorism, suggests that the violation of a moral principle to achieve non-moral good may lead to a slippery slope, and in effect each immoral action will be able to be justified on non-moral grounds. On the other hand, though, too great a rigorism would have to result in pressure to relinquish—thus, it would be morally right for Gauguin not to abandon his family and go to Tahiti, and in consequence not to achieve artistic success. What is doubtful here is the limitation of morally-acceptable action in a way that would have to result in the decrease of artistic talent, excessive conservatism, and the prohibition of innovation: intellectual, artistic, and social (as laden with moral risk). The essence of the controversy is not a choice between good and evil, but a choice between one good and another (whose achievement also encompasses a certain negative element)—the good of Gauguin's family and the good of all the (potential) recipients of his artwork.

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<sup>5</sup> I take action to be moral when it might be described as aiming—at least *prima facie*—at benefiting to or limiting other agent's possibilities of flourishing.

How could a subject considering a similar action find justification for its deed? As Williams notes, the key to evaluating a project like Gauguin's, that, which essentially decides about its success, is the legitimacy of undertaking it. In other words, examining these types of situations, we may deal with several different possibilities:

- a) Gauguin commits an immoral act, after which he goes ahead with his intention; its evaluation is positive;
- b) Gauguin commits an immoral act, though external factors prevent the achievement of the project or its evaluation is impossible;
- c) Gauguin commits an immoral act in the name of a project based on a false evaluation of his own abilities, and in effect fails; its evaluation is negative;
- d) Gauguin does not commit any immoral act and gives up the project; the moral evaluation is positive as long as it does not take into account social (non-moral) benefits.

The last point give rises to a particular moral ambiguity, for, on the one hand, it seems that the moral evaluation of a subject fulfilling its duties, especially basic duties and ones that refer to an asymmetrical relation of causal power (as in the relation to children), is clear. On the other hand, though, a positive evaluation formulated in this way gives rise to anxiety due to its limited character, for it does not take into account the benefits that the realization of the project could bring: benefits made possible thanks to the immoral deed. It seems that a certain form of ambiguity and a certain level of complexity in evaluating the action is unveiling itself here. It does not only refer to the system of norms in which the evaluation is formulated, but also to the scope of information available to the one making evaluations. In this sense, the last of the listed elements contrasts with Kant's conception—just as Kant wanted to avoid the ambiguities of evaluations that involved non-subjective elements, so the fourth possibility takes these into account above all, or at least contrasts the subjective element with the broader significance of its action. The objections



towards the ways of evaluation are similarly symmetrical—as Kant seems to miss the non-individual, social character of actions (any actions, not only moral ones), so advocates of the fourth possibility would have to equally peremptorily demand the decision-making subject to achieve the position of an ideal observer, who would, in addition, be endowed with the ability of predicting the future.

Thus, the factor that determines the evaluation of action is the adequacy of the evaluation by the subject himself. Here, however, the element of luck appears once more, this time with a dual orientation: on the one hand, this is a possible defect in the construction of the project itself, its incorrect formulation, a false evaluation of the possibilities of the subject itself, in the second case, however—which Williams does not seem to pay sufficient attention to—this luck concerns the way in which the subject can construct his project. In other words, the second type of intrinsic luck concerns both the scope of knowledge on the basis of which the subject can gain conviction about the project's legitimacy and feasibility, and the identity of the subject—the way in which the environmental conditions he is raised in and the level of intellectual tools he has access to allow him to gain this type of conviction. Hence, whether or not the agent's act deserves positive evaluation depends, at least to a certain degree, not on his efforts, but on whether the agent's depiction of the situation is adequate, that is—on whether or not all relevant facts were taken into consideration.

### **Ignorance, Responsibility, and the Fear of Action**

In the analysis of luck, an essential doubt comes to light concerning the relationship between the consciousness of the acting subject (his knowledge and ability to reason adequately) and his limited agency, and the scope of the action's consequences along with the social, non-individual character of the evaluation. The element that seems key here is the tension between possible ignorance, on the basis of which



the subject acts, and his responsibility. As Michael J. Zimmerman notes, the basic form of ignorance we are dealing with when asking about the agent's responsibility for his action is the lack of awareness concerning morally-essential facts.<sup>6</sup> The point of departure of his analysis is a thought experiment in which he considers the question of the responsibility of the agent, who, giving aid to the victim of a car accident and presuming that the damaged vehicle may explode (which does not occur), causes the victim's paralysis. The element that morally inculpatates the agent in this case is his lack of awareness of the risk connected with improperly giving aid, which—in Zimmerman's opinion—the agent should be aware of. The problem here lies in determining the character of such a duty, as such a view may lead to the imposition of unreasonably high—thus unrealistic—standards of knowledge that each individual should possess. What conditions must be fulfilled, then, for responsibility for ignorance to be possible?

According to Zimmerman, the subject must be made responsible for actions committed on the basis of ignorance only when he is responsible for this ignorance; at the same time, he notes that no one can directly control his unawareness.<sup>7</sup> The question arises, however, if it can be indirectly controlled. The solution Zimmerman proposes gives birth to certain doubts, as he states, which it is impossible not to agree with, that in the situation described above the subject is evidently guilty of "*carelessness*, or *inconsiderateness*, or something of that sort."<sup>8</sup> However, he rejects this solution as incorrect, indicating that the subject may be unaware of his ignorance, and especially of the fact that this ignorance possesses moral significance. We can add that in essence, though the experience of ignorance is a part of each human being's experience, it is not usually a problem, because the range of knowledge which we do not pos-

<sup>6</sup> Michael J. Zimmerman, "Moral Responsibility and Ignorance," *Ethics* 1997, No. 107, p. 412.

<sup>7</sup> M. J. Zimmerman, p. 414. For definitions of direct and indirect control see Zimmerman, p. 415: "One is in indirect control of something, X, if and only if one is in control of it by way of being in control of something else, Y, of which X is a consequence. [...] One is in direct control of something if and only if one is in control of it in some way that does not involve being in control of it by way of being in control of something else."

<sup>8</sup> M. J. Zimmerman, p. 416.

ness—(potentially) extending into infinity—cannot be the object of our reflection, and especially not an element of practical reasoning. That is why the essential problem here, as Zimmerman notes, is that “[c]arelessness and inconsiderateness typically involve a failure to believe (at the time) that one is being careless or inconsiderate.”<sup>9</sup> Consequently, the author notes that this type of unawareness can only give rise to indirect responsibility, connected with the responsibility for something else (i.e. for that, which causes the subject to lack awareness as to the carelessness of his action), etc. Reasoning similarly for inattentiveness, Zimmerman states that responsibility for unaware behavior (based on ignorance), “must be rooted in culpability that involves no ignorance.”<sup>10</sup> This conclusion seems doubtful, and its critique will be significant for the further part of my argument.

Modifying his conclusions somewhat, Zimmerman indicates an additional condition of responsibility: not only can it solely concern that, with which the subject is “cognitively connected,” but it must also encompass conscious advertent to these objects.<sup>11</sup> The essence of responsibility understood in this way is, as Zimmerman states, the subject’s awareness that he did something morally wrong. Two doubts arise in connection with this statement. First of all, as Zimmerman himself notes, such a belief “can be merely dispositional, rather than occurrent.”<sup>12</sup> In the first case, this advertent is unnecessary, since the subject will not have a tendency to contemplate this belief before undertaking an action. However, these occurrent beliefs are necessary to constitute culpability. Otherwise, they do not seem to participate in practical reasoning and are not motivational components effectively shaping specific actions. Second, a stronger conception of responsibility than the one Zimmerman proposes can be accepted, where the subject’s belief does not have any real significance in acknowledging the responsibility the subject

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<sup>9</sup> M. J. Zimmerman, “Moral Responsibility and Ignorance,” p. 416.

<sup>10</sup> M. J. Zimmerman, p. 417.

<sup>11</sup> M. J. Zimmerman, p. 421.

<sup>12</sup> M. J. Zimmerman, p. 421.

bears. Such a proposal was put forth, among others, by Roman Ingarden, who, in analyzing the basic forms of responsibility<sup>13</sup> indicates bearing responsibility, an ontological state connected with the fact that the subject realizes a “negatively-valued current state of affairs,”<sup>14</sup> which is independent from the one that the subject taking responsibility is conscious of.

That is why it seems that the conception outlined by Zimmerman has certain limitations, the most important of which consists in limiting fault to those cases, where the subject is aware of its sources (i.e. of his culpable ignorance) and making this issue independent from the regulation of one’s own behavior.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, the essence of a moral attitude is, it seems, precisely the assumption of a certain attitude towards this ambiguity concerning the principles of moral action.

How, then, would the morally-right management of this ignorance be possible?

We must note that the discussed issue is not of an epistemological character (thus, it is not the fact of ignorance itself—or, in consequence, the question of possible ways of overcoming it—that constitutes the essence of the problem here), but of an ethical one. It seems that what constitutes the fundamental moral element here from the point of view of the acting subject is precisely the awareness of the significance of one’s action for others. In other words, the moral significance of a given action and the ignorance upon which it is based increase with an increase in the irreversible consequences of the given action and its significance for the objects of the action. Alexander Guerrero calls this moral epistemic contextualism:

<sup>13</sup> Roman Ingarden, “O odpowiedzialności i jej podstawach ontycznych” [“Über die Verantwortung. Ihre ontischen Fundamente”], in: *Książeczka o człowieku*, trans. A. Węgrzecki, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1972), pp. 79—100.

<sup>14</sup> R. Ingarden, p. 99.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. M.J. Zimmerman, *Moral Responsibility...*, p. 426: “[...] lack of ignorance concerning wrongdoing is a root requirement of responsibility. One can have control over one’s vicious behaviour, one can have control over one’s vices, one can be aware that one has such control, and one can have control over whether one remains ignorant of associated wrongness. And, absent such awareness, one is not responsible.”

How much one is morally required to do from an epistemic point of view with regard to investigating some proposition  $p$  varies depending on the moral context—on what actions one's belief in  $p$  (or absence of belief in  $p$ ) will license or be used to justify, morally, in some particular context.<sup>16</sup>

What draws attention in this principle's concentration on the subject—determining the legitimacy of a principle of action will depend on the degree that the subject contemplated, or was able to contemplate, the consequences of his action, as well as on how meticulously he planned his action (in the sense of undertaking the means to limit possible negative consequences). This way, both the scope of the action and its possible negative consequences can be examined by the subject as premises constituting the occurrent beliefs indicated by Zimmerman. Formulating the problem in the categories of virtue ethics, we can say that the primary consequence of moral epistemic contextualism is that it makes caution a virtue, and even a fundamental feature of a moral attitude.

Practicing such a virtue, i.e. true moral reasoning and action based on this virtue, would have to, then, consist in examining those elements—"blockers," as Guerrero calls them<sup>17</sup>—which would force the subject to relinquish his action or reformulate the reasoning that it is based on. What is of fundamental significance from the point of view of the problem discussed here is the contemplation of the subject's knowledge about the nature of the object of his actions, i.e. whether this object possesses a moral status. Thus, an element that is critical *par excellence* appears in moral thought—for, the fundamental element characterizing the moral attitude is not only, as Kant would have it, action that refers to its object as to a goal, i.e. an autonomic being endowed with dignity, but the prior contemplation of whether and how such a quality

<sup>16</sup> Alexander A. Guerrero, "Don't Know, Don't Kill: Moral Ignorance, Culpability, and Caution," *Philosophical Studies*, 2007, 136(1), p. 69.

<sup>17</sup> "[...] call any state of affairs which, if it obtained, could make it morally impermissible to perform some action A, a 'blocker' with respect to A. For example, a blocker with respect to keeping slaves is the state of affairs of all human beings having the right to self-determination." A. A. Guerrero, "Don't Know, Don't Kill...", p. 73.

could and should be ascribed to this object. In other words, the key element of such an attitude is the analysis of whether my action possesses the sufficient foundations. Guerrero solves this problem by constructing a principle which he calls “Don’t Know, Don’t Kill” (henceforth abbreviated DKDK):

If someone knows that she doesn’t know whether a living organism has significant moral status or not, it is morally blameworthy for her to kill that organism or to have it killed, unless she believes that there is something of substantial moral significance compelling her to do so.<sup>18</sup>

A principle formulated thusly permits itself to be generalized in a way that allows for it to be applied not only to cases in which the consequence of action is death (as in case of the controversy over the killing of animals for consumption, or abortion), but to all cases in which the object of (at least potential) manipulation is a being that possesses a moral status.<sup>19</sup>

The acceptance of such a solution seems to have several essential advantages. First, the contemplation and application of DKDK must lead the subject to concentrate on the conditions of his action’s admissibility, and thus to greater reflectiveness and foresight. In effect, we can expect an increase in caution when action is undertaken and a decrease in the amount of errors committed, which seems valuable especially in those cases where the stakes of such action are high. Second, this principle equips the subject with a tool—thanks to the determination of the probability of the appearance of a “blocker”—allowing him to determine both the reasonableness of his action (its legitimacy), and to construct an adequate justification. Finally, DKDK seems—as a result of the above—to at least partially guard the subject against the element of luck. On the one hand, as was mentioned, it allows the subject to come to terms with the risk of the fiasco of his principles of action due to an analysis of probability, consequently opening him

<sup>18</sup> A. A. Guerrero, “Don’t Know, Don’t Kill...,” pp. 78–79.

<sup>19</sup> See A. A. Guerrero, pp. 92–93 for its alternative formulations.

up to the possibility of their critical analysis, at least partially protecting him from succumbing to schematism too easily. On the other hand, the element of extrinsic luck is limited by both the delimitation of a reasonable boundary of demands imposed on the subject as to the knowledge necessary for him to undertake proper action, and the delimitation of a boundary of his responsibility regarding the possible appearance of unintended consequences.

However, DKDK seems to possess two fundamental shortcomings. First, the concept of action that it expresses does not allow us to determine the nature of the “blockers” that the subject should take into account. Putting aside the issue of their historical and cultural mutability, a particular subject himself—who does not need to examine this issue—can have justified doubts as to what he should take into account in contemplating the legitimacy of his action (i.e. how far-reaching the consequences of his action that he takes into account should be, or the moral status of what beings should be treated as “blockers”). As is, the solution as to the choice of relevant “blockers” remains arbitrary. Of course, we cannot expect a closed list of them to be given, but it seems that at least a certain class of objects or qualities should be given, which the subject who is critically analyzing his actions should pay attention to.

Secondly, the acceptance of DKDK or any similar principle as the primary principle laying down the conditions of actions’ moral value may lead to the temptation to relinquish action due to the acceptance of caution’s preeminence over the acceptance of risk. Not only does it sanction the preeminence of negative predictions over positive ones, but it seems to deny the value of any reasons that are not moral reasons.<sup>20</sup> That is not to say that such a limitation is not justified, but it is not universal. That is, such a principle, it seems, could only be a principle *prima facie*. Thus, an alternative appears—if, in accordance with DKDK, we cannot be certain as to whether a given being possesses

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<sup>20</sup> In truth, we should say that precisely due to granting one-sided precedence to moral principles, DKDK sanctions the negative vision of action over the positive.

a moral status (or if our action will not lead to negative moral consequences), we can either give up on the action, or act, accepting as our goal the achievement of a non-moral good. In the concluding passages of *Moral Luck*, Williams indicates that with the concession of absolute primacy to moral norms “final destruction”<sup>21</sup> ensues, the descent of various types of values into morality. And indeed, would it not have been better for Gauguin to accept the reasoning resulting from a principle akin to DKDK and stay at home, sparing his loved ones pain and hardship? In other words, should we not be willing to revise our non-manipulative premise in the face of important non-moral arguments? This problem becomes visible especially when referred to such practices as scientific research, which place their participants in front of certain risky experiments every so often in view of achieving substantial good of a different sort.

It is similar in the case of the precedence of the negative view of action. It seems to lead to or impose upon the subject high standards of determining the probability of success and estimating any possible negative results, or simply to discourage action. The drawback of this solution is that, insofar as in the case of individual action such discouragement may be justified, in the long run it may mutate into the essential character flaw syndrome or even neurosis.

### **The Virtue of Criticism and the Moral Attitude**

In what manner can a subject tackle his ignorance? We must note that for ethics, this issue becomes a problem when it is characterized by a certain regularity—either because it concerns a particular type of situation within the boundaries of certain practice, or because the subject relatively regularly meets with similar situations.

It seems that the main element of a moral attitude is not so much the ability to achieve certain goods, but rather, first of all, to recognize

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<sup>21</sup> B. Williams, *Moral Luck*..., p. 38.



the limits of one's own cognitive abilities and—consequently—of his abilities to determine the right principles of action, and second, to modify them if significant moral reasons appear (“blockers” in Guerrero’s understanding). As Nomy Arpaly notes, a virtue such as this, like all virtues correcting human deficiencies (courage—cowardice, generosity—avarice) appears as an answer to humans’ tendency to absolutize their own convictions and opinions and their inability to subject them to critical reflection.<sup>22</sup> The virtue whose task it is to regulate one’s relationship with his own practical attitude and with possible “blockers” is open-mindedness. What does this open-mindedness consist in?

It seems that the key factor here is making oneself aware that human action usually proceeds on the basis of certain established schemes and habits. In accordance with the etymology of this concept, a subject’s moral character is nothing more than his or her habitual way of referring to reality. The question whether a given subject can be treated as praiseworthy is twofold. On the one hand, we must recognize to what degree his or her actions have been subjected to reflection, i.e. if the subject asked himself or herself the question of whether his or her action was rightful. This is the basic element, and its lack of fulfillment signifies that a subject’s action cannot be recognized as morally right. At the same time, we must note that the consequences of such action are subject to a completely difference evaluation. In this sense, the case of Gauguin can be treated in two different ways—on the one hand, the way in which the subject made a decision and its praiseworthiness or blameworthiness are subject to evaluation; on the other—its broader, social consequences, which can be categorized as beneficial or not, and moral luck also turns out to have a positive value.

The second element of a moral attitude is the issue of the subject’s recognition of his or her own limitations. In characterizing the subject possessing the virtue of open-mindedness, Arpaly writes that

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<sup>22</sup> Nomy Arpaly, “Open-Mindedness as a Moral Virtue,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2011, 48(1), p. 80.

[s]he is the person whose moral concern insulates her from the pull of other concerns that could otherwise render her unresponsive to evidence, in contexts in which something morally significant might be at stake.<sup>23</sup>

This seems to encompass two elements. First, the question arises in which situations the subject should demonstrate particular meticulousness in moral reasoning. Guerrero notes that according to moral epistemological contextualism, what causes an action to gain a special character is the moral significance of the consequences of the action. However, this is only the case when the subject possesses the ability to recognize such significance. Accepting that the subject's manner of action, how he is used to responding to his actions is of a habitual character, we must also presume that the elements he takes into account will be the result of habit. Here, the significance of "blockers" appears—a subject acting morally should consider the validity of his hitherto accepted rules and principles. Such a barrier may be the ability to feel pain or the ability to flourish. In consequence, the second aspect of this issue is the ability of the subject to modify his own convictions after considering the "blockers" and opposing arguments. The point here is not to fall into neurotic suspension, but the ability to distance oneself from his own convictions and analyze them critically. As Arpaly writes, "[t]he open-minded person is not someone who has no opinion, but someone who is prevented from being 'opinionated'—resistant to evidence—by moral concern [...]."<sup>24</sup>

Thus, what makes a given attitude moral is the way in which the subject refers to his actions and convictions. This reference is of a critical character in the Kantian sense—for it is, in essence, a transcendental analysis of the natural, i.e. derived from habit, way in which the subject would tend to react to a certain stimulus. The requirement of controlling one's ignorance as the condition of responsible action, set forth by Zimmerman, can, therefore, only be fulfilled when the subject tries

<sup>23</sup> N. Arpaly, "Open-Mindedness as a Moral Virtue," p. 81.

<sup>24</sup> N. Arpaly, p. 82.

to make his efforts take on such a form as is determined by all the relevant “blockers” in a given situation. However, it seems that this requirement could only be fulfilled if the subject was characterized by a special character trait that consist in examining both what he would usually take into account in a given situation, and if this usual attitude suffices, i.e. if it really takes all the essential elements into account. In this sense, the essence of a moral attitude is summarized by Seneca’s maxim, “Reckon on everything, expect everything” (*De Ira*, III, 16.1)—this constant tension of the intellect’s attention and the will to take into account what is morally significant lead to the subject’s action being deemed conscious, and, in consequence, moral.

### Conclusions

The legacy of critical thought is of fundamental significance for normative ethics not only where—as R.M. Hare saw it—we break away from real action to establish its principles on a critical level.<sup>25</sup> Also—perhaps primarily—in daily experience, making specific decisions and taking specific action, moral subjects decide first of all about what the limits of morality are, which arguments should be taken into account, and which should be omitted for the decision to be considered legitimate. The call to pay attention to the way in which we conduct moral reflection, the way in which we determine our goals, and what we are used to considering the morally-essential limitations of our action is not only a call to making the virtue of open-mindedness a key character trait, but also, to a great degree, causes the individual’s responsibility to be widened so as to encompass not only the practical syllogism, but also its primary premises.

We can accuse this reasoning of accenting the cognitive element too strongly at the expense of the conative; that it depreciates the role of emotions and creates a false image of ethics as a purely intellec-

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<sup>25</sup> Richard Mervyn Hare, *Moral Thinking. Its Levels, Methods and Point* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

tual field. Indeed, if it were not for the creative passion that directed Gauguin's action, would he have at all stood before a moral dilemma? If it were not for compassion, would the protagonist of Zimmerman's thought experiment have brought help to the victims of the accident?

What differentiates these cases is their relationship to the subject's practical attitude. Insofar as the action of a person saving someone's life, even if done clumsily, results from moral premises, Gauguin's action does not seem to result from a similar motivation; rather, it is the question of the maximization of preferences. Thus, what morality seems to add to the practical attitude is, as Arpaly<sup>26</sup> indicates, a certain type of concern which causes the subject's emotions to be shaped in a certain way.

Thus, the primary question of ethics and of a subject guided by its moral attitude is, "with what shall I be concerned?" This, on the other hand, directs the subject's attention not only towards given objects which may become either the objects of action or the barriers which limit such action, but also towards its own consciousness and the way in which such objects may be determined to be morally relevant or not.

As a consequence, one of the elements of the moral attitude will be a certain element of uncertainty connected with the open character of such a critical study. This uncertainty is not only the result of the awareness of the subject's entanglement in luck, but also of the limitations of the subject itself, of his cognitive possibilities or imagination. That is precisely why Williams, indicating regret as an emotion characteristic of the subject's becoming aware of his own limitedness, distinguishes subject-regret from the statement of an unfortunate coincidence. In the first case, the feeling of regret gives the subject information—in accordance with the Stoic conception of emotions being carriers of information<sup>27</sup>—not only about the existence of an alternative to his or her past actions, but also—more generally—about the limitedness of his or her agency.

<sup>26</sup> N. Arpaly, *Open-mindedness...*, p. 79.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought. The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

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It seems, therefore, that what allows for the limitation of the element of luck and the justification of a certain boundary of ignorance is precisely the demonstration that the subject complied with the standards of critical analysis and open-mindedness to all morally-essential elements.

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### Traf, niewiedza i postawa moralna

**Streszczenie:** W powszechnej opinii przedmiotem etyki winno być badanie i dostarczanie ścisłych i niezawodnych reguł działania. Pogląd ten znajduje swoje ugruntowanie w długiej tradycji filozoficznej ciągnącej się od stoików do Kanta co najmniej, jest to jednak pogląd fałszywy. Istnieją bowiem dobre racje ku temu, aby zwrócić baczniejszą uwagę na te aspekty rozumowania moralnego, które podkreślają element ryzyka i niepewności. W artykule pokrótce omawiam dwa z nich: kwestię trafu moralnego i działania opartego na niewiedzy. Refleksja nad tymi zagadnieniami prowadzi bowiem do konstatacji, że najbardziej podchwytliwym elementem w rozumowaniu moralnym, jest przekonanie podmiotu o słuszności przesłanek, na których buduje on swoje działanie oraz o braku znaczenia czynników zewnętrznych dla oceny jego działań. W odniesieniu do tego argumentuję, że podstawowym wymogiem moralnego uzasadnienia pewnego działania nie jest jego zgodność z pewnym zestawem reguł, lecz raczej krytyczny namysł podmiotu nad własnym działaniem. Tym bowiem, co czyni pewną postawą postawą moralną jest w istocie pozamoralny, epistemologiczny czynnik krytycyzmu i otwartości na niepewność.

**Słowa kluczowe:** etyka, namysł krytyczny, krytycyzm filozoficzny, traf moralny, postawa moralna